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Motivating Students Who Don't Care

Learn from educator, psychologist, and author Allen Mendler about ways to make progress with your hardest to reach students.

Why students don't like school often starts on the outside—dysfunctional families, unsupportive parents, violence in our culture, garbage on TV, erosion of respect, and the list goes on, says Allen Mendler, an educator and author of the book *Motivating Students Who Don't Care*.

In fact, 70–80 percent of why kids don't care has little to do with teachers themselves, he says. Whether the problem is at home or in the schools, teachers can do a lot to inspire students, but such work is not without its challenges. One middle school alternative program that Mendler observed isolated its most troublesome students. Although their teachers "had their heart in the right places," he says, they were often overwhelmed by the collective neediness of such students.

Some were effectively limited to about 5–10 minutes of actual instructional time per class period as students straggled in late. These teachers also had to "walk on eggshells" around their students with poor attitudes, fearful of triggering negative comments and behavior.

Yet, one teacher—who worked with the same tough kids—was different. Mendler recalls that this short, high-energy science teacher had already begun mixing chemicals before class started so that students arrived to find "smoking test tubes," which they found intriguing. This teacher also engaged in good-natured banter when students kidded him—he gave as good as he got.

Once, when one angry-looking and chronically unprepared student, Luis, arrived late to class, the teacher called out his name and then tossed an object to him. This "missile" turned out to be a stub of a pencil encased in paper, which allowed Luis to take notes in class like the other students. That teacher, with his unconventional ways, was getting more out of the same students than the other teachers, Mendler concludes.

Instilling Hope

Many educators would say we shouldn't be enabling students like Luis, who seemingly expects that the teacher will always have an extra pencil and paper to hand out to him, Mendler admits. Doesn't that reinforce irresponsible behavior?

While it certainly is important that students come to class on time, do their homework, and be prepared with pencil and paper, instilling a sense of hope in students is more important than demanding responsibility, Mendler urges.

"Hope must precede responsibility because kids who lack hope have no reason to act in responsible kinds of ways," Mendler argues. "There's no reason to be motivated unless [the student] is hopeful that this particular class is somehow going to improve [his or her] life; that coming to this school is better than not coming; that coming here and performing, producing, and behaving is better than coming here and wasting time pushing other people's buttons and doing nothing." The teacher's small interactions with students during class were focused around the theme of hope.

For example, the teacher returned one student's test with a 50 percent grade—objectively a failure—but this teacher gave specific feedback to the student. After congratulating the student on the correct answers, he also invited him to come see him on his own time to figure out what he did wrong with the prospect of redoing his work for a better grade. This teacher was giving students a sense of hope that they can perform and produce.

Five Key Ways to Awaken Motivation

- . **Show students how achievement benefits life.** This is a conventional approach, but it works. Tell students that getting good grades, working well, and making an effort do lead to fulfillment in adult life, whether that means going to college, getting a decent job, or buying a house, and so on. Even if students don't buy into it, the notion will be planted and they will think about it.
- . **Create challenges that students can master.** Give students incremental challenges. For example, for the student who chronically doesn't do homework, Mendler suggests you ask her to do one problem for the next day, saying that you're going to call on her for the answer. Between 90 and 95 percent of typically unmotivated students, says Mendler, will at least prepare that one problem. Mendler reasons that students who lack motivation have been so accustomed to thinking that they can't be successful, that they have to be given small opportunities so they "may be reawakened" to the fact that they can be successful.
- . **Focus on the teaching and learning process.** Be aware of the characteristics of a task that can be motivational elements. For example, is there enough time for the task? Can the student be successful at it? Is there some novelty to it? Are students sure of the purpose of it? Should it be done by oneself or with a partner?
- . **Establish relationships.** If you invest enough chips in your "goodwill account" with certain students, you can make a "withdrawal" for which you demand better behavior, more academic effort, and so on.
- . **Give rewards for an immediate gain.** Use this strategy to obtain a quick change in behavior.

In Mendler's book *Motivating Students Who Don't Care*, he emphasizes a core framework for building motivation. The framework includes the following: building relationships; creating hope; respecting power, which means to let kids know that they have some meaningful influence within the school; emphasizing effort; and expressing enthusiasm.

Teachers Have to Be Optimists

You should believe that a student can change. Especially for those working with difficult students, teachers have to fight against the bugaboos of pessimism, skepticism, and cynicism.

"Anytime I've ever heard myself engaging in biased thinking [about a student's abilities], I know first and foremost that I have to wage a battle with me or else I am not going to be a player in influencing and motivating kids," Mendler says.

For example, he talks about one teacher on the verge of burnout, who decided to engage in "mental gymnastics"; that is, imagining that when students walk in the door, it's the first day of school. For that teacher, the first day of school holds the most promise, energy, and hope that everything good is possible. The teacher said that he noticed that not only did his own attitude change, but so did the students.

Change Is a Roller Coaster Ride

Remember that change is a roller coaster ride; students will have ups and downs even as they move forward. Like all of us, students will revisit old behavior many times, even as they try to acquire new behaviors. So give any strategy at least five tries in a two- or three-week period. If it seems to produce some ups, even with the "backsliding," than the strategy is taking hold.

Persuasion over leverage. Use leverage and persuasion to help change kids. Leverage asks, How will I get this student to work? Persuasion asks, How will I show this student that when he gets his homework done his life improves in a way that he values? Educators tend to overuse leverage, which the most challenging kids dismiss outright. Calls home to parents, time outs, and even grades may have little effect on students, if kids are not motivated by parental approval, being part of "time in," or achievement.

Try a variety of strategies. Be courageous enough to integrate new knowledge, including unconventional strategies for working with challenging kids. Multiple strategies are necessary because one size does not fit all when it comes to motivating students.

Take good emotional care of yourself. Otherwise, burnout is inevitable, Mendler says. This could include getting support from a trusted colleague to talk about a trying student, stress positives, or even give "physical support" by arranging to take on a disruptive student during a hard moment.

While poorly motivated students are often intent on pushing our buttons to try and get us to throw in the towel, helping them to succeed first "requires an attitude of not giving up on them," Mendler emphasizes.

Allen Mendler is an educator, school psychologist, and nationally known presenter on discipline and motivation. He has worked extensively with children of all ages in regular education and special education settings. He is author of *Motivating Students Who Don't Care* and the ASCD book *Connecting with Students*, and he is coauthor with Richard Curwin of *Discipline with Dignity*. He can be reached at allen@disciplineassociates.com or at 1-800-772-5227, or through his Web site at www.disciplineassociates.com.

This article was adapted from the audio recording of "Motivating Students Who Don't Care," a presentation by Allen Mendler and Richard Curwin at ASCD's 58th Annual Conference in San Francisco, California.